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Conference Abstract

Collections from Colonial Australia in Berlin's Museum für Naturkunde and the Challenges of Data Accessibility

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Abstract

German-speaking naturalists working in southeastern Australia in the mid-19th century relied heavily on the expertise of First Nations intermediaries who acted as guides, collectors, traders and translators (Clarke 2008, Olsen and Russell 2019). Many of these naturalists went to Australia because of the research opportunities offered by the British Empire at a time when the German nation states did not have colonies of their own. Others sought to escape political upheaval at home. They were welcome employees for colonial government agencies due to their training in the emerging research-oriented natural sciences that the reformed German universities offered at a time when British universities were still providing a broad general education (Home 1995, Kirchberger 2000).

Wilhelm von Blandowski (1822–1878) and Gerard Krefft (1830–1881), who both worked in colonial Victoria and New South Wales, are among this group. Throughout their work, they corresponded extensively with naturalists in Berlin, exchanging specimens and ideas. But the preserved Australian animals, plants and rock samples, as well as the written and drawn records of animals and landscapes now held at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin (MfN), are much more than objects of scientific interest. They also contain information about Australia's First Nations. The collections provide evidence of their role in collecting as well as their knowledge of the natural world, which has long been overlooked

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and, at least in part deliberately, made invisible by Western knowledge systems (e.g., Das and Lowe 2018, Ashby 2020).

People data have been recognised as crucial for linking such collection objects with expeditions, publications, archival material and correspondence (Groom et al. 2020, Groom et al. 2022). It can thus potentially help reconstruct invisibilized Indigenous histories and knowledge. However, while the MfN keeps information about European collectors and other non-indigenous agents associated with their specimens in internal catalogues, databases and wikis, Indigenous actors remain largely absent from these repositories, which reproduce the colonial archive 'along the archival grain' (Stoler 2009).

With this in mind, we discuss in our presentation the complexities of using persistent identifiers and tools, such as Wikidata, to improve the integration and linkage of people data in the work currently being undertaken by the MfN and the *Berlin's Australian Archive* project to digitise and make accessible the museum's collections. Drawing upon the guidance provided by the FAIR*[1] and CARE*[2] principles for data (Wilkinson et al. 2016, Carroll et al. 2020), and learning from the 2012 ATSILIRN Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services*[3], the 2019 Tandanya Adelaide Declaration and the 2020 AIATSIS Code of Ethics*[4], we address the potential of these efforts in terms of collection accessibility, and also highlight the challenges and limitations of this approach in the context of colonial collections.

Keywords

Australia's First Nations, CARE principle, colonial collections, FAIR data, Indigenous knowledge, knowledge transfer, natural history collections, Wikidata

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Conflicts of interest

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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Endnotes

*1 Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable
*2 Collective benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, Ethics
*3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library, Information and Resource Network
*4 Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies